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Civil War Treasures: A Homeopathist Surveys the Defenses outside Washington

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Feature Essay

Civil War Treasures

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A Homeopathist Surveys the Defenses outside Washington

Washington, D.C., was the most heavily fortified city in North America at the close of the Civil War, but the nation's capital possessed only the flimsiest of defenses at its start. Major John Gross Barnard, chief engineer of the Military District of Washington, began erecting fortifications on the Arlington hills as early as May 1861, but much remained undone when McClellan assumed command of the Department of the Potomac on August 17 and became responsible for the capital's defense. In the meantime, a homeopathic physician from Pittsburgh visiting the city with his young nephew created an interesting record of Washington's emerging defenses during that first frightening summer of the war.

Dr. Jabez Philander Dake (1827-1894), a homeopathic physician, was born in Johnstown, New York, on April 22, 1827. He graduated from Union College in Schenectady, New York, in 1849 and from the Homeopathic Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1851. He practiced medicine in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, between 1851 and 1863, and served as professor of materia medica and therapeutics at his old medical college from 1855 to 1857. Dake was elected secretary of the American Institute of Homeopathy in 1855 and its chairman in 1857. He married Elizabeth Church (1826-1908) in 1851 with whom he had five sons, all of whom became doctors. Ill health forced him to leave Pittsburgh for his farm at Salem, Ohio, in 1863, where he established the Hahnemann Life Insurance Company of Cleveland.¹ His wife's poor health compelled them to move again in 1869, this time to Nashville, Tennessee, where he practiced medicine until his death on October 28, 1894.²

James Fillmore Crank (1842-1935) was the eldest son of James Denison Crank and Anna Eliza Dake. Dr. Jabez Philander Dake was his maternal uncle. He was born in New York, but moved to Ohio around 1866. Crank married Mary Agnes Brigden (1846-1932) on May 26, 1868, while working for his uncle as secretary of the Hahnemann Life Insurance Company in Cleveland. He moved to Pasadena, California, in 1877 where he purchased Fair Oaks Ranch in the San Gabriel Valley and began a career as a businessman and civic promoter in Pasadena and Los Angeles. Crank was president of the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Valley Railroad Company, which brought rail travel to Pasadena in 1885, but he is remembered chiefly for bringing the Santa Fe Railroad to Los Angeles in 1887. He also invested in street railways in

¹ Samuel Hahnemann (1755-1843) was the German physician who created homeopathy.

² *Transactions of the Fifty-First Session of the American Institute of Homoeopathy* (Philadelphia: Sherman, 1895), 218-220.

Los Angeles, citrus orchards, vineyards, and real estate, as well as being a member of the state assembly from Los Angeles County.³

A few years before Dr. Dake and his nephew began their business association in Ohio, they visited the nation's capital as it geared up for war in the summer of 1861. A bird's-eye view drawing that they made together gives a curious picture of the Federal fortifications on the Virginia side of the Potomac River as viewed from Washington on August 11, 1861. It describes troop numbers, forts, cannon, and ordnance supplies. Even "Genl. Lee's house" is pictured near Arlington Heights in the upper right of the sketch. Despite the great amount of work to be done to deter Confederate advances and make the capital fully secure, Dr. Dake expressed nothing but confidence: "There must have been 30 or 40,000 troops on the Va. side. The forts were nearly all well supplied with 24 & 32 pound cannon, some of them rifled; supplied with plenty of ammunition and shot & shell. Fort Runyan seemed to be the largest, but Ft. Albany was a very fine one—walls high and strong. Troops in good condition, cooking their dinners in the shade of trees, etc."⁴ In time this gossamer web of fortifications would grow to nearly seventy enclosed forts, one hundred batteries for field guns, and twenty miles of rifle trenches, but Jabez Dake's and James Crank's simple pen-and-ink sketch still delights in revealing the hesitant but hopeful beginning of Washington's Civil War defenses.

Hans Rasmussen is a librarian and the technical coordinator for LSU Libraries Special Collections.

³ Glenn S. Dumke, "The Career of James F. Crank: A Chapter in the History of Western Transportation," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 6 (May 1943): 313-332.

⁴ Virginia Civil War Fortifications Bird's-eye View, Mss. 3626, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.